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Washington, D.C. -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is recognizing 36 programs around the country as providing the best in health care as judged by peers in specialized clinical areas.

Designated as "VA Clinical Programs of Excellence," the services cover specialized programs in eight categories: cardiac surgery, renal dialysis, geriatrics, home-based primary care, health care for the homeless, spinal cord injury, serious mental illness, and substance abuse.

VA Under Secretary for Health Dr. Kenneth W. Kizer said, "These exceptional, high-performing clinical programs have been identified as the finest in what they do compared with the best in American health care. They serve as models for the VA health-care system in measurement of clinical outcomes, as well as in education, training and research."

A total of 87 programs were nominated and screened by clinical rating panels based on factors specifically designed for each type of program. Criteria included excellence in clinical care outcomes, outstanding clinical care processes, exemplary customer service or patient satisfaction, efficient resource utilization and, where applicable, the best in teaching and research.

Nominators were asked to compare performance, outcomes, and benchmarks to other programs inside and outside the VA health-care system, using measurable criteria accepted by outside organizations, where possible.

The VA Clinical Programs of Excellence is one of several efforts instituted in the last two years to enhance the already high quality of care provided in the veterans health-care system. Designation as a Program of Excellence is for two years, after which programs may apply for recertification.

Successful nominations spanned a variety of innovations both in clinical approaches, service delivery and customer service. For example:

- Since its inception in 1972, the substance abuse treatment program at the Boston VA Medical Center has expanded clinical services and established an enviable track record for VA and non-VA research support for substance abuse-related problems, attracting distinguished investigators among its staff and faculty. It offers a wide range of clinical services, such as acute detoxification, psychopharmacological treatments, chemical substitution treatments, and vocational and transitional residency programs.
- The Spinal Cord Injury Service of the VA Puget Sound Health Care System serves Washington, Alaska, Montana, Idaho and Oregon in an integrated program. Its patient-centered approach and rehabilitation model actively involve patients in defining their goals and treatment plan. It boasts a high rate of returning those with spinal cord injury to independent living.
- Among the accomplishments of the New Orleans, La., VA Medical Center's health care for homeless veterans program was a reported 90 percent improvement rate after discharge among veterans with alcohol problems, some 17 points higher than the VA national average. Three-fourths of these homeless veterans leave the program to a stable residential

setting, and more than half are employed when they depart the program.

- The Dallas home-based primary care program of the VA North Texas Health Care System was recognized for several innovative activities in its program to deliver primary care to veterans in their homes through an interdisciplinary hospital team. Examples include an aggressive preventive medicine program, timely reviews of medication profiles by a clinical pharmacist, and monthly calls that provide education and support-group services for patients and caregivers without leaving the home.
- Both inpatient and outpatient services are offered in the geriatric evaluation and management (GEM) program of the Little Rock, Ark., VA Medical Center, which is supporting about 280 admissions per year in the inpatient GEM while expanding its outpatient GEM services to cut clinic waiting times, reduce bed days of care, and increase customer satisfaction.
- The Cardiothoracic Surgery Section at the VA Palo Alto, Calif., Health Care System was recognized for better outcomes for patients undergoing cardiac surgery. The program has developed new approaches to the management of cardiac surgical diseases and earlier this year became the first VA medical facility to perform a new minimally invasive mitral valve procedure.